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## **A brief history of Nordic Walking**

**Marta Anna Zurawik**

**Centre for Research for Health and Well-being,  
The University of Bolton, United Kingdom**

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### **Abstract**

Walking is a popular form of exercising, because it is inexpensive, safe, and accessible form of physical activity that be performed in various environments. Nordic walking, also known as walking with poles or fitness walking is an activity that uses specially designed walking poles to engage a whole body in a workout. The early developments of the activity are linked to Finnish governmental actions in 1960's and then commercial endeavours in the USA and Finland in 1990's in order to improve health of sedentary populations. Five decades later Nordic walking is a popular exercise and leisure activity promoted to general public in many countries around the world.

### **Early beginnings of walking with sticks**

Walking with sticks has a long history and it has always been associated with old age senility and infirmity. Shove and Panztar (2005, p. 47) noted that “ever since humans learned to walk on two legs, they have used their free hands to carry clubs, canes and crooks or to support themselves on the crutches”. The history of walking with specially designed

sticks for health is short, and yet there is a long lasting dispute between Finnish and American Nordic walking practitioners who actually “invented” it. The European sources claim that the original concept of the activity, named later Nordic walking, can be traced back to the 1930’s when in summer time the Finnish cross-country skiers used skiing poles to exercise and prepare for winter seasons. In 1966, Leena Jääskeläinen, a physical education lecturer from University of Jyväskylä, introduced walking with ski poles, called ‘Sauvakävely’ in Finnish, into the students’ lessons as “New ideas for P.E. in schools” (INWA, 2010). In 1987, she presented walking with ski poles at a public event, Finlandia kävely (Finlandia Walk), in Tampere for the first time. The activity was soon noticed by the Finnish Central Association for Recreation Sports and Outdoor Activities (Suomen Latu) that with a help of Exel - sport equipment manufacturer, began the “reinvention” of walking with ski poles. According to the Finnish sources, another person who had a significant role in development of Nordic Walking was Mauri Repo, the former Finnish cross-country skiing head coach, who described different training methods for the off-season cross-country ski training in 1979. Repo’s training methods are still used in the practice of fitness and sport Nordic Walking practitioners (INWA, 2013b).

### **The American development of exerstriding**

The American sources state that the walking with specially designed poles was “invented” in 1985 in the United States by Tom Rutlin (Urbanski, 2007), who named it “Exerstriding®” - simultaneously exercising all the body's muscles while walking, running, skipping or bounding (Rutlin, 2013). In 1988, Tom Rutlin launched the first commercially available fitness walking poles called “Exerstriders®” that had leather straps and rubber tips for use on asphalt surface (Downer, 2005; Urbanski, 2007). In the online blog dedicated to Nordic walking, David Downer (2007) presented the evidence that walking with specially designed poles was commercially established in the USA, a decade before the Finnish competitors:

“It all began in 1988 in Wisconsin, USA, when Wisconsin resident Tom Rutlin launched the very first commercially available fitness walking poles. Tom created the name Exerstriding (Exercising all the body’s major muscles while striding) to describe his new creation. This isn’t hearsay or speculation, it is hard fact. I actually own an original 1988 copy of Tom’s ‘Exerstrider Manual and Instruction Guide’ that he sent out with every new set of poles (and still does today). [...] Name and also that Tom’s poles and techniques are slightly different too” – That may be the case but it's still 100% ‘fitness walking with specially designed poles!’”.

The claims of American originations are supported by two studies on the effects of 12-week programmes of fitness walking with poles, called exerstriding, conducted by Larkin (1992) and Karawan (1992), who suggested that the walking with specially designed poles was recognised in the USA as a valid rehabilitation exercise before its commercial break in Europe in the mid 1990's.

### **The beginnings of Nordic walking**

The name Nordic walking and walking technique with specially designed poles originated in Finland and was commercially reinvented and reframed by three Finnish organisations:

- 1) Finnish Central Association for Recreational Sports and Outdoor Activities (Suomen Latu) - a promoter of outdoor activities, which focuses on increasing interest in exercise, developing possibilities for outdoor exercise, maintaining and improving quantity and quality of hiking routes and walkways in Finland (Suomen Latu, 2013a).
- 2) Finnish Sport Institute (Vierumäki) - a national coaching and training centre for sports and physical education. The institute operates under the Ministry of Education and Culture that develops, produces and markets high-quality coaching, training and education services both nationally and internationally (Vierumaki, 2013).
- 3) Exel - Finnish sport equipment manufacturer, including cross-country skiing poles (Exel, 2013a,b).

In 1997, those three organisations began a collaboration to design poles suitable for health walking in order to encourage people who were not keen on exercising to be more active. Exel created walking pole prototypes, which had special tips and straps and the appropriate length for comfortable walking. Athletes from Vierumäki fitness-rebuilding programme tested the new poles by performing uphill-downhill exercises similar to traditional cross-country skiers' summer training. The aim of the tests was to demonstrate the benefits of walking with poles in various landscape conditions and develop special poles for walking. The tests results indicated that walking with Exel poles was effective in raising the pulse to the levels that benefit heart and circulation systems, and activated various muscles in the legs and upper body. Encouraged by the positive results, Suomen Latu and Vierumäki published the first brochure on the techniques and benefits of walking with specially designed poles. Exel became responsible for creating a demand for walking poles. The company launched the sale of the poles under the trademark "Walker". The walking poles had special tips and straps and the appropriate length for comfortable walking.

They were made of composite, carbon fibre or glass fibre - the most important factor was that the material was durable, light and did not vibrate when poles struck the ground.

At first, the distribution of the poles was challenging since Finnish sports retailers refused to sell the equipment. Therefore, Exel had to change a marketing strategy. The company decided to focus on creating a demand for the activity first among Finnish people. In autumn 1997, Exel agreed with Suomen Latu to give around 1000 poles to build the activity awareness and educate people how to walk with poles during walking events (Oksanen-Sarela and Timonen, 2005). This way, news about Nordic walking and its benefits spread quickly in the local Finnish communities. In particular, the walking events were popular among middle-aged women and older adults who had an opportunity to try a new type of walking and learn the correct walking technique. In order to reach an even larger number of people, Suomen Latu decided to build instructor networks in the country. Instructors taught the correct walking technique and offered positive experiences. They created communities, in which individuals felt appreciated and shared the same or similar positive experiences of the activity. Although, the main role of the instructors was to promote the activity and Exel equipment by providing information about health benefits of walking with poles, and explaining the differences in Exel poles suggesting that the manufacturer of the equipment guarantee the best quality of poles. Exel aimed advertisement directly at the consumers, using a marketing strategy of a mouth-to-mouth communication, which was a successful form of promotion due to several factors. First of all, people had an extensive knowledge about the activity and equipment due to informative role of instructors and they informed each other about Nordic walking and its benefits. In addition, instructors encouraged people to be involved in the activity, providing a friendly atmosphere, positive feedback and support. Peer recommendations were perceived as more reliable and trustworthy than advertisements. Since 1997, the popularity of Nordic walking have grown due to active promotion, which gradually led to increased demand for “the product”- Exel walking poles. Although, despite the initial interest in this new activity and soar in Exel sales, in the beginning there was a motivational conflict - people were afraid of going outdoors to practice Nordic walking. The Nordic walking image challenges were tackled with extensive publicity in television, magazines and newspapers that focused on health benefits of the activity. Furthermore, Exel sponsored scientific research conducted by the Cooper Institute in Dallas on the effectiveness of Nordic walking (ANWA, 2013). The results showed that Nordic walking had more impact on body than ordinary walking, it provided stability for patients with orthopaedic and balance concerns, which finally gave a scientific

proof of Nordic walking health benefits (Church et al., 2002). The scientific results together with doctors' public support for the activity gave Nordic walking further credibility. People became more enthusiastic about the activity and with time Nordic walking groups were getting smaller and later on, people started walking in pairs or individually. By the end of 1998, hundred and sixty thousand (4%) Finns practiced Nordic Walking regularly, Suomen Latu was organising Nordic walking trainer courses for 200 local associations, and Vierumäki trained more than two thousand instructors in Finland. In 2002, according to the Finnish Sports Federation report, Nordic Walking was the 7th most popular sports hobby among adults in Finland with around half a million (14%) regular walkers and 1.6 million (35%) Finns, who tried it at least once. In 2004, there were 760 thousand regular Nordic walking practitioners (Suomen Latu, 2013b).

### **International development of Nordic Walking**

With this commercial success in Finland, Nordic walking was introduced to the rest of Scandinavia as a next step of the activity and product expansion. From Scandinavia, the popularity of Nordic walking spread to the rest of Europe. The international interest in the walking with poles influenced Exel to reinvent the name from Finnish commonly known as "Sauvakävely" (pole walking) to Nordic walking. The company also decided to change the name of brand of walking poles from "Walker" to "Nordic walker". Changes in name of the activity and equipment were significant for gaining recognition and acceptance around the world.

In the year 2000, the International Nordic Walking Association (INWA), changed later to Federation, was founded by Aki Karihtala, Raija Laukkanen, Vesa-Pekka Sarparanta and Marko Kantaneva. Since then, the International Nordic Walking Federation has been the only international organisation working on a non-profit basis authorised by the creators of Nordic Walking to promote, develop and educate Nordic Walking internationally and support a global network for Nordic Walking instructors. INWA also collaborates with scientific, medical and professional communities in sports, health and fitness offering research guidelines, developing teaching methods and educational programs for Nordic Walking. Currently, INWA is a governing organisation for Nordic walking with member organisations in over 20 countries (INWA, 2013a).

In recent years, Nordic Walking has become a popular activity around the world and the amount of walkers and instructors has risen dramatically. According to INWA statistics, the participation in the activity around the world rose from one hundred and sixty thousand

in 1998 to over ten million Nordic walking practitioners in 2012 (INWA, 2013b), and the activity is recognised as a training programme with systems of accreditation for the Nordic walking instructors (Gotowski and Zurawik 2013).

The growing popularity of Nordic walking around the world especially among middle-aged and elderly adults (Kukkonen-Harjula et al., 2007) lies in its simplicity and accessibility. Shove and Pantzar (2005, p. 60) suggested that the activity is widely accepted by populations worldwide yet depending on the country and culture. Nordic walking emerges in various leisure and health contexts:

“In Japan, Nordic walking is confined to leisure resorts, and is certainly not practiced in the streets. In Germany and France, Nordic walking is framed as a safe, risk-free method of engaging with mild nature. By contrast, American Nordic walking is about body shape and fitness”.

In Great Britain, Nordic walking has been developing in commercial and non-profit sectors. The Nordic walking technique is taught by the instructors during fitness classes. The activity also became a popular practice as a part of health programs and health walk schemes, offering free walks in local communities across the country.

### **The future**

Within few decades, it transformed from a ridiculous-looking form of training to a leisure practice due to actions of producers and practitioners, private and public interests. Nordic walking changed the urban and rural scenes in many countries around the world, and managed to engage various groups of populations in walking.

The fast growing popularity of the activity, the “Nordic walker” brand of poles created a platform for Nordic Fitness Sports. The concept was launched in 2003 and embraces both summer and winter sports that activate lower and upper body in a workout, such as Nordic blading - Nordic walking which involves inline skating with specially designed angled Nordic blader poles and Nordic snowshoeing - walking with snowshoes and poles, hence getting exercise similar to Nordic walking. Nordic walking is an example of a very successful leisure venture.

Furthermore, a good reputation of Nordic walking has encouraged the development of other activities based on the Nordic walking technique, such as BungyPump. It is a modernised version of walking with poles that have built-in suspension system providing extra resistance for the body when the pole is pressed down (BungyPump, 2014).

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